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SBA Recognizes One “HOT” Business

ANSTED - Robin Hildebrand, president of Blue Smoke Inc. in Ansted, is in many ways a typical West Virginia small business entrepreneur but in other ways quite unique.

Born in rural West Virginia, the 12th of 14 children, Robin's family supplemented their food supply by processing fresh fruits and vegetables grown in their garden out of necessity, not as a hobby.

“Being from a large family, we sometimes didn't have enough food to go around,” said Robin. “Raising a vegetable garden was just a way of life with each and every family member spending time working the garden and canning.”

Robin took the qualities and skills that she learned from gardening; hard work, perseverance, creativity, and enthusiasm to create Blue Smoke, Inc., a woman-owned small business that has grown by leaps and bounds, receiving state and national recognition.

Robin started the company in 1993 as a sole proprietorship out of a need to find a job where she could work at home and still care for her family. Drawing on the gardening and canning experience she obtained while growing up, she began making salsa for friends and co-workers from the basement of her home.

“Everyone liked the salsa and said I should be selling it, not giving it away as gifts,” said Robin.

“I really didn't know much about starting and running a business, but I was willing to learn,” she continued. She made a few calls and found out about Jim Epling at the Small Business Development Center located just down the road in Oak Hill.

“Jim stressed every successful business began with a business plan,” stated Robin. “I spent several hours at my kitchen table writing and perfecting that plan.”

Once the business plan was set, the next step was to transform the dirt-floored basement of her home into a FDA approved kitchen. This challenge demonstrated Robin's tenacity and business savvy. After a preliminary inspection of the basement, which in addition to the dirt floor had no running water or ventilation, she was told that there was no feasible way it could meet the standards and be approved. That wasn't about to stop Robin.

“In less than a year, my basement was approved as the first FDA commercial kitchen in a residence in West Virginia,” Robin proudly stated. This is a real example of Robin's philosophy, ‘Women think differently than men when it comes to business. If you want something done right and quickly, let a woman do it’.”

Through mostly “word-of-mouth” advertising, Robin quickly outgrew her basement kitchen. Her husband Jeff was making deliveries of Blue Smoke products to ten local stores. That number soon increased to 25 and today her products are sold in over 460 locations across 15 states.

Blue Smoke incorporated in 1995 and moved into a leased building in the city of Ansted. A retail shop was opened to capture some of the local business and attract some of the tourists on their way to Hawk's Nest State Park and other attractions.

As demand increased, so did the need for the automation of the manufacturing process. In 2002, Robin purchased a vacant 12,000 sq. ft. building in downtown Ansted and renovated it as a manufacturing facility and retail outlet.

"No matter how many people stop in the store or wherever I go, I'm always asked 'How did you come up with the name Blue Smoke Salsa?' said Robin.

It all started with a hot pepper and a childhood game. Being one of the youngest siblings, Robin had to work hard at defeating her 13 brothers and sisters when they played. One family favorite was an unusual game of tag that involved chasing each other around the garden with hot peppers.

"I knew that the hottest part of a fire was the blue flame, so armed with a pepper, I would chase my brothers around yelling 'This one's blue smoke!'" said Robin. "What I meant to say was 'blue fire,' but the phrase stuck. That's how Blue Smoke got its name."

Locating the business in downtown Ansted was not only a good business decision, it was good for the community as a whole. Before Blue Smoke located to Ansted, there was little to no business activity and a majority of the buildings were vacant. Now other businesses are renovating and moving into buildings that were once vacant. As Blue Smoke grows, so does the business community of Ansted.

As production and revenues increased, so did the recognition. She has received numerous honors, being named as Tamarack's (a state artisan facility) vendor of the year in 1999, Ernst & Young's emerging entrepreneur for 2000, and most recently named as Best Salsa in the Americas by the Americas Food and Beverage Show, beating out entries from even Mexico. Most recently, Blue Smoke Inc. was named West Virginia's 2004 Small Business of the Year by the U.S. Small Business Administration.

And she's not stopping there. Robin has plans for national distribution of her products, an organic product line, and a specialty food line for kids, "Jus Kiddin" which will debut this month.

"You know, it just goes to show that hard work, determination and perseverance really does pay off," concluded Robin.

For additional information about the programs and services offered by the SBA and their resource partners, contact the West Virginia District Office at 1-800-767-8052 ext. 8 or by email at wvinfo@sba.gov, or visit our web site at www.sba.gov/wv.

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